

Charlotte Cooper

POLY

## Polyamory

I'm making this zine because of the minuscule amount of stuff I encounter about poly, most of the things I read are either a bit 101 for me, or are overly earnest. I just want to write about it for a bit.

I've been doing poly for about 15 years, which works out as several millennia in queer years. For me this is basically a couple of concurrent long term relationships and some dating, but everyone approaches it differently. I could stretch to more people, I think, I can handle complexity, I have a big appetite for this kind of thing, but I don't know how that might be, it depends on other people. Maybe things will happen, not happen, or partially happen – like a dog's portion, a sniff and a lick; I just want to live a happy life, however that goes.

Meanwhile, I'd love to know more about poly history and culture so that I can make greater sense of who I am and what I do, and try and understand why other people choose to live in this strange and marginal way. Poly often seems entirely made-up to me, a product of wingnut American hippies, libertarians and sci-fi geeks, legitimised through spurious cross-cultural and historical claims, and maintained by charismatic, self-satisfied subcultures (hello queer anarchists!). That's my theory. These ideological roots mean that poly life can often be ludicrous, pompous and kitsch. Hence this zine, and we're back to the beginning again.

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10.10

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Have some poly fun with me: <http://tinyurl.com/date-o-matic>

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Can you handle academic writing? Read this shit hot article: Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin and Christian Klesse (2006) 'Polylogue: A Critical Introduction to Polyamory.' *Sexualities* 9:5, 515-529 Drop me a line if you want to get your hands on it but don't have access to academic libraries.

This zine turned out crankier and grumpier than I anticipated. I needed to get some things off my chest.

## Wise words of the chosen one

Sometimes people ask me: how do you do it how do you do it how do you do it? The answer is: I am a special and amazing superstar with magical and mysterious skills whispered to me one day by the Poly Fairy who entrusted me with her arcane secrets. The petty concerns of the mortal realm do not touch me because I am made of glitterdust, I care not for propriety or respectability. I move within a realm of superfolk, people untroubled by base human emotion, those who have attained a higher consciousness where they are free of earthly worries. We all share gifts of the most incredibly esoteric sexual knowledge. Our hearts are made of light and our farts sound like the delighted giggle of a contented child. We wear a lot of togas and lamé bodysuits, and we don't walk, we waft hither and thither.

So here are my words of poly wisdom, which I'm handing down to you, dear sweet know-nothing, from my perch up here in the fragrant clouds of smug self-righteousness:

Beware, the systems you live in will fuck with you, just muddle through as best you can, do your best to be happy, and try not to be a wanker.



## Fucking it up

With all the poly pressure to be perfect and good and ethical and right-on, I'd love to read a book or a zine, or a blog, or watch a film about people's poly disasters. Some of my greatest hits look a bit like this:

I couldn't bring myself to come out at my old corporate job, I didn't want to have to explain myself to my terminally straight colleagues working in a system I hated. I couldn't talk about my boyfriend because that would have negated my queer identity, and I didn't want to talk about my girlfriend because that would have erased my long-term relationship with the person I live with. I spent the *five years* I worked there part time as this kind of pathetic mole person living a double existence, where my real life was vivid and exciting, yet I was presenting at work as this beige, unassuming, wallflower. Many of my colleagues never bothered to learn my name.

I lied to person A, who I love, to make them go away whilst person B, whose pants I wanted to get into, chatted me up. I didn't want to lose face by being authentic with either of them.

I made out that I was really cool and knew all about poly, when actually I'd just started, didn't know a fucking thing, and ended up hurting someone who was also trying to be really cool about poly with me in return, and was hurting me just as much.

I destroyed a friendship by hitting on this person's lover because I was under the assumption that, you know, we were all pals, everyone has the capacity for poly and everything's negotiable. Uh, they don't and it isn't.



I'd be barking up someone's tree and they'd be barking back at me, and then they'd realise that there's a bit more to my picture, which they couldn't handle, and their barking would stop but woof woof woof, there I'd go until I noticed that I'd fallen on my arse again and the game was over. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

woof woof woof!

Tears and desperation look funny on paper.

## The Zell-Ravenhearts

The Zell-Ravenhearts are neopagans from, where else, California. Oberon Zell-Ravenheart is a wizard, he started *Green Egg* magazine as well as a school for wizardry based on the fictitious Hogwarts of Harry Potter fame. Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart makes unicorns for a living. She does this by surgically interfering with the horn buds of young goats so that they grow a single horn. A goat called Lancelot that she mutilated in this way toured with a circus.

In 1990, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart used the term 'polyamory' for the first time in an article in *Green Egg* about her and Oberon's group marriage. It stuck.

Even if I was able to put aside their animal cruelty, I would struggle to applaud the Zell-Ravenheart's eccentricity. This is because I don't want to be implicated in it. They are nutbags who can only exist because they live in communities of nutbags with nothing better to do, where stupidity like 'wizardry' is encouraged.

I always thought poly had some fundamental relationship to feminism, that it was a critique of monogamy and marriage, tools of The Man. But it's also a rationale for a bunch of hippy swingers. How can I make sense of this or situate myself within it? If Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart's article from 1990 is the extent of the historical-philosophical underpinnings to poly, then I'm really in trouble. On what am I basing my life choices? What am I defending as valid? Poly appears so complete and rational yet I'm learning that there's nothing at its heart other than this idiotic unicorn nonsense.

I understand poly as a way of living that embraces complexity and ambiguity, but as I dig and try and find out more I understand that I'm adrift without an anchor. *Watch out, pretension alert:* I'm making sense of poly as an absurdity, a post-binary bricolage model of relating surrounding a philosophical void. Polyamorists, I'm scared and I think we really are alone and making it up as we go along.



## This is how it's different

The everyday domesticity of my poly life is dull to an outsider. Sometimes my boyfriend cooks the dinner and I wash up, or I cook the dinner and my girlfriend washes up, or we watch a film together on the telly, or my girlfriend reads us a detective story. Who cares about any of this but me and my loves? (Sometimes it gets up when I have sex or go out on a date. I write about that part elsewhere because it's great to write about sex, and weird to go from a place of easy familiarity to one of uptight dating etiquette.) You could argue that these tiny activities are dismantling civilisation as we know it, but only a stalker would be interested in my day-to-day.

There are differences between how I live and how most people live. Dealing daily with chronic invisibility, other people's prurience, and misinformation is a total drag. You have few rights, there's a constant threat of censure, and if you have long-term poly relationships, especially if you have kids, there's a feeling that you live on the outer limits of legality. Few people can handle being that punk 24/7. You're constantly trying to cram your life into a model that assumes adults move around in pairs: booking hotel rooms if we go away together can be annoying, same with sitting together on trains and rollercoasters. I have two sets of partner's families to contend with, none of whom are supportive of us, as well as my own relatives, who also remain freaked-out by my difference. People who might offer you love and support, including friends, don't always step up when you need help because they're, I don't know, embarrassed or confused about you. Sometimes I'm out with my loves, perhaps someone catches my eye, or I catch theirs, and that can be awkward and complicated; I've developed some smooth social skills because of this. Sharing our lives can be delicate and I don't blab everything about the other to the other, though after all these years there aren't many secrets between us. Poly brings stress, for lots of reasons, but still a bunch of us insist in cracking on because it suits us in spite of it all.

Sometimes the differences are sweet and unexpected. What makes my life different to people who are in monogamous relationships is that sometimes I sleep in a different bed with a different person. I give two lots of presents at xmas, and I get two loads in return. Same with my birthday and their birthdays. I have two sets of house keys but, oddly, I have a thing where I like to ring my girlfriend's doorbell and have her answer it to me, so I rarely use that set. It's easy to play an impromptu game of tag or charades when there are three of you. My girlfriend likes buying mini-trifles from the supermarket because they come in packets of three, "Poly win!" she says.



## Boredom leads to bitchiness



\* f\*\*\* compassion too.

I'm fascinated and irritated by the things that crop up again and again in introductory poly accounts. I know I should have more patience but I don't. Can't someone change the record already? Here's my snark.

### **Evangelism**

Poly is a worthwhile challenge, only certain kinds of high-functioning ethical superhumans like me can do properly. There's a key to it, a knack, a secret that only insiders understand but which can never be articulated to those poor, sappy, monogamous losers on the other side of the divide, except in the vaguest of terms.

### **Jealousy is the most pressing emotional concern**

You need to know how to refute jealousy because it's the first thing that people ever ask you about when they find out you have poly relationships. Countering allegations of jealousy is a key poly skill because you want to honour the integrity of your relationships. Whether or not jealousy really is a central part of poly experience depends on the people involved, I think.

### **People in Other cultures legitimise poly in Our culture**

Marriage is not my bag, neither is god, so why should I give two hoots about religion-based polygamy? There is nothing in Mormonism, for example, that I would like to apply to my own life. The Western liberal humanist reading of Other to reinforce a concept that's barely related to it really bugs me. And who is this Us or We anyway?

### **Relationships are reduced to a list of universal Dos and Don'ts**

Do talk to each other; Don't cheat; Do stick your head up your bum; Don't bother calling me.

### **Resource lists for dead organisations**

Or groups that never got started, or are nothing more than a place name that promotes the myth that poly people are everywhere. We aren't.

### **Poly jargon that makes your life sound really unappealing**

"Hello, I'm Charlotte and I'm the pivot in a v-shaped triad."

## Poly Kitsch

Even if there's little substance at the heart of poly, there are few other choices for freaks who don't want monogamy. You'll cry if you don't laugh, as the cliché goes. I don't want to end this zine on a bum note so I'm going to lead us out on a merry dance through the delights of poly kitsch.



First, get yourself in the mood with a few pages from Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, whose protagonist is a polyamorous Martian. Groovy!

Next, crack open a copy of *Triad*, David Crosby's 1967 song about free love that was never properly released because the other Byrds thought it was too creepy. It's got the somewhat slimy faux naïve refrain: "And I don't really see/Why can't we go on as three."

Ok, so now we're going to work on poly symbolism.

Let's start with pi, always fun to say and spell. Pi stands for P, the first letter of polyamory. Polyamorists like their pi to be golden because, according to people that like this sort of thing, that's the colour of emotional attachment.

Too deep? How about the parrot, an irritating failure of a visual pun on "Polly wanna cracker" that makes me want to \_\_\_\_\_.

Too corny? You could always draw yourself an infinity heart, basically a heart outline with an infinity symbol inside (like an 8 on its side) because love goes on forever? I'm confused. You could combine it with the official poly colours, blue for honesty, red for passion and black for solidarity with people who are closeted. These colours and symbols appear on the poly flag and are part of the Polyamory Awareness and Acceptance Ribbon Campaign.

I'm going to go deeper into the woo with Infinite Love in Infinite Combinations, a symbolic mish-mash of all this other junk based on Vulcan philosophy from *Star Trek*. Yes, it's true. →

Finally, there's the boring but graphically inoffensive triangular Purple Mobius Strip, devised because, understandably, people had arguments about the other symbols.

Welcome to my world.

